

Testimony of  
The Honorable Ann M. Veneman,  
Secretary of Agriculture

Before the United States Senate  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

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Chairman Harkin, Senator Lugar and distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry to discuss with you the President's proposal for a new Department of Homeland Security and the integral role of agriculture in that new agency.

The President appreciates the timely manner and bipartisan approach in which this Committee and the Senate have considered this proposal. And, I certainly appreciate the continued cooperative relationship USDA continues to have with you and your staff on the important issues facing our food and agriculture sector, particularly as it relates to the subject at hand today, and that is the security and protection of our homeland.

I would also like to thank Governor Ridge for his participation on this panel today. During the past several months, I have enjoyed a strong working relationship with the Governor and I can tell you he understands clearly the importance of USDA's role in homeland security. As the President's advisor on these issues, I have grown to appreciate his knowledge and understanding of the complex issues throughout federal government.

As well, it is good to see Alfonso Torres, USDA's former APHIS Administrator, who is now at Cornell University. He is someone in which the Department has a great deal of respect and I'm glad to see him here to offer the Committee his perspective on this homeland security proposal.

The plan that President Bush has put forth is bold and historic, aimed at better protecting our nation from potential terrorist threats in the future. The President's approach is to bring together agencies currently with missions related to the protection of our homeland and merge them into a single agency that will better protect, better prepare and better coordinate this critical responsibility.

This requires extraordinary vision, new thinking and the ability to look at the much larger issue at hand – and that is again, the protection of our citizens against potential threats.

We have seen the devastation, destruction and lives lost by the events of September 11. It is something that nobody ever wants to see repeated. It is why all of us here today are discussing the important issues of homeland security and how we best prepare and plan to prevent any future attacks from happening. But, if there ever were an emergency, how do we best prepare this nation – and the infrastructure which supports it – to respond in the case of an emergency.

That is why yesterday, the President unveiled the nation's first-ever National Strategy for Homeland Security.

This strategy takes an important look at not just the Department of Homeland Security, but lays out a forward-looking approach to secure the nation from terrorist threats. It builds on the many reinforcements to our federal, state and local structure that the Administration, Congress and related stakeholders have worked so hard to strengthen since September 11.

And, during the past several months, our mission at the U.S. Department of Agriculture has taken on new context and different missions.

In the past, the focus of most of our efforts has been to prevent and deter the unintentional introduction of pests and diseases from entering our country.

To better protect agriculture and our food supply, we have worked closely with other federal agencies, state departments of agriculture, academia, and the food and agriculture sector on many fronts to secure and strengthen planning and preparedness. Simply put, we are working together to better protect agriculture, our food supply and consumers from potential terrorist threats.

For example, we have expedited work with U.S. Customs Service to implement an automated inspection targeting system. We have collaborated with research universities and state agriculture departments to step up the development of rapid detection systems, expand our network of diagnostic laboratories, strengthen pest and disease surveillance, better secure and strengthen laboratories, and improve emergency preparedness capabilities.

The recently enacted Public Health Security and Bio-terrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 authorized the Department of Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to promulgate and enforce regulations concerning the possession and use of Select Agents - certain hazardous biological organisms and toxins widely used in over 300 research laboratories across America. Examples include the bacterium that causes anthrax, the bacterium that causes Plague, and the virus that causes Ebola, a lethal hemorrhagic fever. Select Agents are prime candidates for use by would-be bio-terrorists and thus, when used in research, must be kept constantly under safe and secure conditions.

The Administration believes that the new Department, with its strong multi-purpose security infrastructure, will be best suited to prevent nefarious or other irresponsible uses of Select Agents. The Administration proposes that the Secretary of Homeland Security would administer the select agents program in consultation with the Secretaries of HHS and USDA with these agencies continuing to make key medical and scientific decisions, such as which biological agents should be included in the select agents list.

Through the President's FY 2003 budget proposal and supplemental appropriations by the Congress, we will continue those efforts. Border protection personnel levels will be at their highest levels ever, and investments in the areas of research, laboratory upgrades, security, have enhanced our ability to prepare and respond to potential threats to American agriculture.

While a great deal of work has been done in a very short amount of time, the job is far from over. We cannot let down our guard. When it comes to protecting U.S. agriculture and our food supply, we must continuously improve and strengthen our protection capabilities.

This is why the President proposed including USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)- the agency that prevents and manages outbreaks of pests and diseases- and the Plum Island Disease Facility in the new Department.

In the past few weeks, the House Agriculture Committee has worked with the Administration to refine the President's proposal. The result of that work appears in the Committee's amendment that moves the specialized border inspection and enforcement functions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as the Plum Island Disease Facility, to the new Department.

The Administration supports the amendment. And, we look forward to working with Congress so that the final bill provides the Secretary of Homeland Security the coordinating authorities required to ensure integrated plans to address the threat of agro-terrorism.

The House Agriculture Committee's amendment is consistent with the President's goal of unifying the border and transportation security functions of many Federal agencies. It affirms the critical role played by inspections of agricultural cargo, conveyances, and international passengers. It acknowledges the close partnerships USDA inspection personnel have developed with the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Border homeland security inspection personnel involved in examining cargo, passengers, and trade in food and agricultural products.

In short, the transfer of APHIS' agricultural quarantine inspection program and the Plum Island Animal Disease Center to the Department of Homeland Security is the right step to take to protect our Nation's security and agricultural health.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar and Members of this Committee, again let me thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. This nation's food and agriculture sector is such a critical part of our economy and way of life. A potential attack against any component of our food and agriculture sector could cause great harm, including the loss of jobs and confidence in our food system.

A Department of Homeland Security will strengthen our ability to protect our food and agriculture sector from potential threats. And, it will continue to promote and invite cooperation, planning and preparedness among federal, state and local agencies, in a coordinated and integrated manner.

I appreciate the leadership from this Committee in addressing the important issues related to homeland security, particularly as it relates to the protection of agriculture and our food supply. I look forward to answering your questions and for a continued dialogue on these and other important issues in the future.